

DISPELLING THE MYTH: Over the back!

By Tony Haire

If you have ever been to an organized basketball game on any level you've heard it.

Two players jump for a rebound and the player from behind gets the ball. "*Over the back!*"

You've heard it from coaches. You'll hear from other fans. We all hear it when we watch a game on TV. But the truth is, it doesn't exist. There's no such thing as "over the back."

It is a term officials refer to as "announcer speak." It has its origin with the talking heads that grace our airwaves from November to March. Years ago, a play-by-play or color analyst uttered the phrase, "Over the back!"

We don't know who said it. We don't know when it happened. But we know rules myths and fallacies have been created by television's talking heads. This particular myth is so widespread that even some officials mistakenly use the term. Unfortunately, this simply further perpetuates the myth.

The common misconception is that anytime the player who has inside position doesn't get the rebound, then it has to be an "over the back" violation. Fans seem to think this is the case whether there is contact or not. That's the myth.

Rebounding is governed by the principle of verticality, just like other phases of the game that allow a player to legally occupy a space on the floor. Every player is entitled to a spot on the floor, provided the player obtains the spot without illegally contacting an opponent. He is allowed to jump vertically within his established space and have his hands and arms extended within his vertical plane. He is allowed this opportunity without regard to where his opponent is positioned.

When a shot goes up, many players go to great lengths to maneuver for position. When the ball caroms off the board or rim, contact can occur between two opponents going for the ball. But just because contact occurs, it does not mean a foul has occurred. If both players are jumping within their vertical plane, then any contact that occurs is incidental.

It is not a foul on the player who is rebounding from behind his opponent just because he is behind him. The player who has position between his opponent and the basket is given no more protection or consideration than his opponent. As long as both players stay within their vertical plane, a foul shouldn't be called.

We also hear many fans yell "over the back" when a taller player reaches over a shorter opponent from behind and snags a rebound - even if he doesn't touch his shorter opponent. Is this a foul? Of course not. First, there has to be contact for a foul to occur. Second, that contact has to be illegal. Finally, why should a player be penalized simply because he's able to reach above an opponent and rebound the ball without contacting him?

You're probably thinking, "If there's no such thing as 'over the back,' when does a foul occur?" A foul occurs when actual illegal contact occurs. A foul occurs when either player displaces their opponent. Without regard to who has better position, a player who pushes and displaces the opponent has fouled. When the player from behind violates the opposing player's vertical plane and displaces him, it's a foul. By the same token, the player in front can jump backwards and foul.

Having the inside position does not guarantee the player a rebound or a foul. Many times, you'll see the inside player jump into the player from behind, who simply went up within his vertical plane. "That's over the back ref!," is often heard. No, I'm afraid it's not. That's a foul on the inside player.

Along those same lines, players can legally box out an opponent. Boxing out is simply a form of screening. But players who are attempting to box out can also foul. We refer to this as "backing out" versus "boxing out."

A player who is boxing out is not allowed to displace his opponent by backing him out, anymore than a player is allowed to push an opponent in front of him. That's a foul. Whether a player is using his hands or his body, it's still a foul to push and displace an opponent.

We also see players who will back under a player who has leaped vertically for a rebound. We once again hear cries of "over the back." But it's the player who is backing out that has violated the rebounder's verticality.

I'm certain that we'll continue to hear cries of "over the back." We'll continue to hear from fans, coaches, players, and yes, unfortunately, a few officials. But you'll know better.

There is no such thing as "Over the back."